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THE CAVE SCENE IN *DIE FAMILIE SCHROFFENSTEIN*

At the beginning of the famous cave scene of *Die Familie Schroffenstein* (Act V, scene 1) stands a stage-direction which runs in part as follows: "(Agnes mit einem Hute, in zwei Kleidern. Das Überkleid ist vorn mit Schleifen zugebunden.)"

This is somewhat unusual, as it gives the impression that Agnes must have changed her usual mode of dressing to be ready for extraordinary events soon to be enacted in the cave. Certainly Kleist felt, when he wrote the direction, that the actress needed special instructions in costuming for the part.

Scholars have accepted this stage-direction at par without much question. Even Meyer-Benfey, who analyzes the play with his usual detail and pedantic fulness, seems not to suspect anything unusual here. But a comparison of the direction with the text of the scene will show that it does not accord with Kleist's original conception, that it is an afterthought, a questionable attempt to make the play acceptable to the theater-going public.

Dressing "in zwei Kleidern" is not motivated in any way in the play. An attempt at motivation would be an intolerable absurdity. Putting on a double suit in the safety of her castle at Warwand, in order to run into danger in the mountain-cave and exchange the outer one for Ottokar's mantle, in an effort to deceive two murderers from Rossitz, Rupert, and Santing, merely to save her life, would be the acme of absurdity.

Plainly Agnes suspects no danger until she has come to the cave and Barnabe has confided to her the accidental meeting with Rupert and Santing (Act IV, scene 4) and her indiscretion in mentioning her errand to Agnes and the tryst in the mountains, for she expresses the vain wish:

Hättest du mir früher das gesagt! Ich fühle
Mich sehr beängstigt, möchte lieber, dass
Ich nicht gefolgt dir wäre.

Just as plainly, Ottokar is coming to save Agnes' life from his father's hands, but he has no plan formed, no conception of an

exchange of clothing as the means of rescue. This must appear from the following circumstances. He has just learned of Sylvester's innocence, has sent Barnabe to bring Agnes to the mountain-cave, that he may announce his discovery. Before going himself he confides the news to his mother, Eustache, who, misjudging Rupert's mood, reveals to the latter not only the innocence of Sylvester but also the love of Ottokar and Agnes and their habitual trysting in the mountains (Act IV, scene 1). This leads at once to Ottokar's imprisonment, so that Rupert may seek out Agnes unhindered. By the connivance of the turnkey, Eustache gains admission to the prison, confesses to Ottokar her great indiscretion and Rupert's murderous plan:

Und jetzt erschlägt er seine Tochter [Act IV, scene 5].

Also:

. . . . Wenn sie in dem Gebirge jetzt,
Ist sie verloren, er und Santing sucht sie.

These two bits of information from the mother, coupled with his own knowledge of Agnes' presence in the mountains, condition his whole behavior. He is already considerably delayed by his imprisonment, but he knows the directest path to the cave, and may yet arrive in time. He makes in perfect safety the rather remarkable leap of fifty feet (cf. Wallenstein's safe fall in Regensburg) from a rather remarkably unguarded window, succeeds in evading his father and Santing, and arrives at *nightfall*.

The time guarantees deep darkness at a little distance within from the mouth of the cave, and everything is in keeping. Barnabe has to look "scharf hin auf den Weg" and "es wird sehr finster schon im Tal"; she sees "aus allen Häusern schon Lichter schimmern" and "da regt sich etwas Dunkles doch im Nebel," and she can barely distinguish human shapes at a little distance, but not whether they are one or two. In such a scene there is no need for *double* costumes to avoid *nudity*.

When the lovers meet, Ottokar impulsively reveals his fear for Agnes' safety by his joy in finding her *still alive*. From Agnes he now learns what he had not known before his arrival, namely, that Rupert and Santing are not *blindly* seeking her in the mountains, but have a clue in the movements of Barnabe ("Wir müssen ihnen

auf die Fährte gehen," Act IV, scene 4). This revelation makes a plan of rescue imperative, and imposes haste. But little time is left. The *exchange of clothing* occurs to Ottokar now for the first time as promising a disguise under which Agnes may escape to Warwand in safety, one which he himself can easily doff in the presence of Rupert, if necessary, or in which he may fall unrecognized, if only Agnes is saved.

How does Kleist, how does Ottokar conceive this change of clothing?

Plainly as something *unmaidenly*, something that Agnes in her modesty would refuse as readily and positively as Käthchen von Heilbronn refuses to bare her feet and ankles in the presence of Gottschalk when she wishes to cross the river with the "Futtermal" (*Käthchen*, Act IV, scene 1). Agnes' fear of the murderers and her modesty must both be overcome. Ottokar accomplishes both by laying before her his discovery of Peter's death by drowning, Sylvester's consequent innocence, and the hopes for their union to be grounded on these facts.

. . . . Lasst uns
Die schöne Stunde innig fassen. Möge
Die Trauer schwatzen und die Langeweile,
Das Glück ist stumm. Wir machen diese Nacht
Zu einem Fest der Liebe, willst du?

He promises reconciliation of the fathers, public betrothal, and then:

Mit diesem Kuss verlob' ich mich dir.

And now he announces the plan of rescue:

Noch eins. Wir werden hier *die Kleider wechseln*,
In einer Viertelstunde führst du Agnes
In *Männerkleidern* heim.

This passage must be forced from its natural meaning, if it is applied to a simple exchange of Agnes' "Überkleid" and "Hut" for Ottokar's "Mantel" and "Helm." But that the exchange is something more complete is shown by the careful removal of Barnabe to the cave's mouth, as well as by Ottokar's succeeding efforts to take Agnes' heart and imagination by storm with the words:

Du wirst mein Weib, mein Weib! Weisst du denn auch,
Wie gross das Mass von Glück?

and the less delicate hint:

O du Glückliche! Der Tag,
Die Nacht vielmehr ist nicht mehr fern. Es kommt, du weisst,
Den Liebenden das Licht nur in der Nacht,—
Errötest du?

Agnes' embarrassed question:

So wenig schützt das Dunkel?

and Ottokar's reply:

Nur vor dem Auge, Törin, doch ich seh'
Mit meiner Wange, dass du glühst,

confirm the impression of deep darkness.

Then follows the description of the wedding-day, the departure of the guests, the retirement of the wedded lovers, all accompanied by appropriate action. Agnes' love is enkindled, her imagination filled, so that she yields passively to what follows, scarcely realizing it, *save as a thing permissible to wedded lovers*.

Dann kühner wird die Liebe,
Und weil du mein bist—bist du denn nicht mein?—
So nehm' ich dir den Hut vom Haupte (*er tut es*), störe
Der Locken steife Ordnung (*er tut es*), drücke kühn
Das Tuch hinweg (*er tut es*), du lispelst leis', o lösche
Das Licht! und plötzlich, tief verhüllend, webt
Die Nacht den Schleier um die heilige Liebe,
Wie jetzt.

At this stage Agnes' imagination identifies the dark cave with the bridal chamber after the candle has been extinguished to spare the bride's modesty. She has already had removed her hat and the kerchief that hid her neck and bosom (cf. Graf Wetter's "Tuch" which he gives to Käthchen to cover her exposed bosom, and the "Halstuch" which Freiberg threatens to take from Kunigunde to reveal her deformity, *Käthchen*, Act II, scene 6), and now, while passion floods like a bank-full stream in spring

. . . . schnell
Löse ich die Schleife, schnell noch eine (*er tut es*), streife dann
Die fremde Hülle leicht dir ab (*er tut es*).

Again it is forcing the natural meaning to make "fremde Hülle" mean a mere outer garment. That which does not belong to the body, is not a part of the body, is "fremd." We have here a contrast

between the natural body and the body's foreign covering, and the language can only imply a complete removal of Agnes' clothing.

This is confirmed by her behavior. As she feels her garments removed, she exclaims: "O Ottokar, was machst du?" and in her tense emotion falls upon his neck to hide her confusion, and he answers:

. . . . *Ein Gehilfe der Natur*
Stell' ich sie wieder her,

words which are absolutely devoid of sense, if Agnes is not absolutely nude. How could he, as a servant of nature, *restore nature*, by removing an "Überkleid" only, and leaving her *completely dressed*? It does not help at all that the author inserts here another stage-direction: "(An dem Überkleide beschäftigt)." It only makes the following passage stand out more sharply in contrast, when Ottokar justifies his act by the question:

. . . . Denn wozu noch
 Das Unergründliche geheimnisvoll
Verschleiern? Alles Schöne, liebe Agnes,
Braucht keinen anderen Schleier als den eignen,
 Denn der ist freilich selbst die Schönheit.

A moment of anxiety interrupts them here, for Rupert and Santing are approaching the cave's mouth and have probably caught sight of Barnabe, the lovers' sentinel. Haste is needed. Ottokar returns to Agnes and says:

. . . . *du frierst,*
 Nimm diesen Mantel um (*er hängt ihr seinen Mantel um*).

Again this implies her nudity, and shows what sort of re-dressing is undertaken. It is not a formal and complete donning of Ottokar's suit, for he has not undressed. She has but a man's mantle folded close about her. As she sits thus before him, Ottokar exclaims:

Wer würde glauben, dass der *grobe Mantel*
 So *zartes* deckte, als ein *Mädchenleib*?
 Drück' ich dir noch *den Helm auf deine Locken,*
 Mach' ich auch Weiber mir zu Nebenbuhlern.

The contrast here of "der grobe Mantel" and "ein zartes Mädchenleib" is in keeping with our interpretation and offers nothing in support of the stage-direction.

At this point a stage-direction tells us: "(Ottokar wirft schnell Agnes' Oberkleid über, und setzt ihren Hut auf)." Inasmuch as he has only removed his mantle and helmet, this is intelligible and sufficient. Now that the disguise is accomplished, Ottokar ventures to inform Agnes that his father is coming, and that no one will harm her, if she will only go boldly out of the cave "ohne ein Wort zu reden . . . in deiner Männertracht."

It only remains to examine the closing scenes, to determine whether any other passage confirms or contradicts the assumption that Agnes leaves the cave *nude*, except for Ottokar's "Mantel" and "Helm."

We see later simply that the disguise is complete enough to fulfil its purpose. Agnes is permitted to pass by Santing and Rupert, because they believe her Ottokar, and when she returns to the cave, and Sylvester appears with torches, it deceives even her father, and she falls a victim to his mistaken revenge.

Still later, when blind Sylvius discovers the error by the sense of touch, the language is so general that it is not pertinent, and even the words of the grief-stricken parents of the dead lovers give no further support to either view.

Internal evidence proves that the original conception of Kleist was, that Agnes had all her clothing removed and escaped with Ottokar's mantle and helmet only. The insertion of the stage-directions was an afterthought, an effort to make the scene *theaterfähig*. Perhaps it was not alone the grotesque madness of Johann, and the impossible absurdity of the little finger of Peter's corpse being identified by the mother after it had been cooked for Barnabe's witches'-broth, that provoked the laughter of Kleist's friends in Switzerland when he read them these closing scenes. They may have been startled at the naïveté of a dramatist who demanded of his star actress a complete disrobing on the stage, even in theatrical darkness. For the Kleist who delighted in the "Schrecken in Bade" and evidently lingered with delight over the physical perfections of Käthchen, especially in the grotto scene, nothing could be more natural. If we add that he was at the height of his Rousseauistic cult at the time of his first Paris visit and his subsequent Swiss sojourn, the argument seems complete.

The result of the whole study would indicate further, that the cave scene may have been conceived first as a separate poem, a companion to the "Schrecken im Bade," and only later made the starting-point for the creation of a five-act drama. This backward development of the dramatic movement may readily account for the triviality and inconsequence of some elements of the exposition which have been stumbling-blocks to the careful reader. The action did not grow out of given materials by logical necessity, but it was pieced together to lead up to a scene already composed, which, however, still retained certain inextinguishable elements of its original conception that were discordant with the later dramatic inventions.

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